

Wednesday, October 12, 2011

9:35 AM

RFK-DE

Very rough draft

[Bud Southard, who was writing a case history of the Cuban Missile Crisis at CIA, had urged me to interview Bobby Kennedy, if I could. Southard had a feeling, he told me, from his study of the crisis that an ultimatum had been conveyed to the Soviets on Saturday evening.

If so, it wasn't recorded in any documents he'd found and no one he'd spoken with had any knowledge of such a threat-with-a-deadline. JFK's message to Khrushchev on Saturday afternoon—ignoring the proposal in the Soviet message received that morning for mutual withdrawals of US/NATO missiles from Turkey and the Soviet missiles in Cuba and offering only a no-invasion pledge for Cuba—had not been an ultimatum. It hadn't mentioned any deadline. It purported to accept terms JFK interpreted as having been offered the night before—Friday, October 26-- by Khrushchev. Though American preparations for invasion were moving ahead more or less publicly, it didn't put any more time pressure on the Soviets for an answer than earlier exchanges had.ⁱ

We now know from the Russian side that Khrushchev's Friday letter, asking only for assurance that the US would not invade, had been dictated by Khrushchev (and cleared with the Presidium) in the belief that an invasion was imminent at any moment. By the next day, the Soviets had gained confidence that an invasion was not merely hours away, and Khrushchev immediately sought to prolong the bargaining for better terms. The ExComm all thought at the time that the tougher tone of the Saturday morning letter, demanding a trade with the Turkish missiles, indicated that hawks in the Presidium were forcing Khrushchev's hand to rescind the softer terms of the night before.

In reality, both messages were Khrushchev's personal work. Though Khrushchev, it turns out, had already made the decision by Thursday, the 25th, that he would have to withdraw the missiles, he was in no rush as of Saturday morning to conclude haggling over the deal, even making new demands, because he was now calculating that US invasion was at least days away.

Meanwhile, the shoot-down of an American U-2 Saturday morning by a Soviet SAM—which the ExComm assumed was a deliberate escalation by Khrushchev (it was the first and only deliberate, overt killing of an American soldier by Soviet troops in the entire Cold War)—further signaled to the Americans that the Soviet position—with or without Khrushchev in control--was hardening, more willing to take risks and less prone to accept the terms that seemed possible even the night before. That meant that JFK's proposal of Saturday afternoon—"accepting" those earlier terms--would probably be unsatisfactory to the Kremlin.

But Khrushchev's sudden announcement early Sunday morning that he was withdrawing the missiles that day—unexpectedly accepting, and even acting on, Kennedy's Saturday afternoon offer with no further haggling over conditions—was an intoxicating surprise. In effect Khrushchev ignored his latest demand that the Turkish missiles be removed as the price of Soviet withdrawal, just as JFK's message had done. The overt bargaining had ended abruptly after exactly one concrete offer (from Khrushchev Saturday morning, the Cuba-Turkey trade) and one counter-offer (JFK Saturday afternoon), though neither side had made a take-it-or-leave-it proposal or announced a deadline.

This suggested to Southard (an intelligence analyst) that something more urgent had been communicated to Khrushchev in the hours before his announcement Sunday morning, something that was not reflected in the classified records of the crisis and perhaps was not known beyond the circle of a very few Americans. Knowing that Bobby had had private meetings with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin at least once earlier in the crisis, he suspected that Bobby might be one of those Americans.

"I think Bobby gave him an ultimatum," Southard said to me. "Maybe you could find out. Could you get to him and ask him?"

Southard had one other question to put to RFK. Although neither JFK nor Khrushchev in their final messages in the crisis had mentioned the US missiles in Turkey at all, the missiles had been removed less than six months later. De Gaulle had publicly voiced his suspicion, as had others, that there had been a secret deal. Southard thought there might be something to this, and that it might have been part of a Saturday night communication. "See if you could feel him out on that."

Knowing that Bobby Kennedy was a close friend of McNamara's, I arranged through an aide in McNamara's office to set up an appointment with Kennedy in his office in the Justice Department.

The Attorney General was in shirtsleeves at his desk, with a tie askew, when I visited him. He seemed awfully young, to be a cabinet officer. In fact, younger than his years. (He was 39, six years older than I was). He seemed somewhat nervous and unsure of himself, belying his reputation for being brash, bullying, brusque. He didn't make a strong impression on me, especially at first. (My sense of him at our next meeting just three years later was of an entirely different man.)

I'd read in the papers that he was looking for a new job. It was well known that he and his new boss, Lyndon Johnson, despised each other. Even so, there was inevitably speculation that he wanted to run as Johnson's Vice President that summer, a slot that was still open. That seemed more plausible (until Johnson rejected it) than the odd rumor that he wanted to be Secretary of State. He had even volunteered to replace Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to South Vietnam, when Lodge resigned to run for the Republican nomination. I happened to have been talking with McGeorge Bundy in his White House office when Bundy took a call from James Reston evidently asking about this. Bundy

told Reston that the administration "couldn't think of accepting that offer. We couldn't put another member of that family in danger."

I described my project briefly and began asking him questions about the events of October, 1962. At one point, he said reflectively, "There was something else, something going on at that same time...what was it?" He leaned back, looked out the window tapping his fingers on the desk, then looked at me and said, "When was Vienna?" (The Vienna Summit between his brother and Khrushchev).

I said, "June, 1961."

I was shocked. I thought to myself, "This guy wants to be Secretary of State?"

He said, "Ah. Mmm. Well, it was something else." We moved on.

I've never figured out what he might have been referring to.

Sunday, November 6, 2011
3:39 PM

[Somewhere mention: I never called him "Bobby" to his face, even when I got close to him in 1968. I didn't know anyone who did, except his wife. But I didn't know anyone who called him anything else when he wasn't present. I always thought of him that way, like everyone else, so I'll use it here.]

I asked him whether he thought Ambassador Dobrynin had known of the presence of the missiles before they were discovered, when he was denying it. He said, "We thought there were two possibilities. Either he hadn't been in the confidence of his own government, in which case his usefulness was ended, and he should leave. Or else, he had been lying to us, in which case his usefulness was at an end, and he should leave."

I waited for him to follow up on that, then said, "But he didn't leave."

"No." Drily: "And his usefulness was not at an end."

Scot's answer

He told me that his brother had sent him to meet with Dobrynin on Saturday evening, October 27, after a meeting of the ExComm. They met in the Justice Department, in the same office where we were talking. He was to deliver a copy of the letter from the president to Khrushchev, which was being wired simultaneously to Moscow, and to pass on some information orally.

Referring to the U-2 that had been shot down that morning by a Soviet-manned SAM, "I said 'You have drawn first blood, and that's a very serious matter.' I said the president had decided against advice—strongly from the military, and not only the military--to respond militarily to that attack, but he [Dobrynin] should know that if another plane was shot at, we would shoot back."

"He said that we had no right to be flying over Cuba, and I told him that if we hadn't been flying over Cuba we still wouldn't know that they had put missiles in, contrary to what they'd told us.

"I said we would be continuing to fly reconnaissance missions over Cuba, we had to. The shooting had to stop. If one more plane was shot at, we wouldn't just attack just the site that had fired at it, we would take out all the SAMs and anti-aircraft and probably all the missiles. And that would almost surely be followed by an invasion."

"I said that because of what had happened that morning, the situation was getting out of hand. There was very strong feeling that this had to come to an end. I told him that if they didn't start removing the missiles, we would remove them."

I asked, "Did you name a deadline?"

Bobby said, "Yes. 48 hours."

So there was an ultimatum. Either he read my mind or I said it out loud, I don't remember, but he said, "I told him it wasn't an ultimatum, just a statement of fact."

I had heard two separate threats. To be sure I'd understood, I said, "So they had 48 hours to start removing the missiles, or we would destroy them. But if they fired any more at our recon, we would attack immediately."

He said, "That's right."

I asked him if Dobrynin had brought up the deal that Khrushchev had proposed Saturday morning. He said, "He asked about the missiles in Turkey. I said those were obsolete and the president had wanted to replace those for some time. If we got this settled, I could tell him that those missiles would be out of there in a few months. But they were NATO missiles. There could be no deal. If the Soviets ever described this as part of a deal, the missiles would stay in Turkey."

So Southard was right on both counts. We'd been talking for an hour, and he was getting restless. I thanked him and left. I called up Southard at CIA and—not getting specific over an open line—told him that his guesses had been right, and I'd give him the details later.

The next day, in the Pentagon, I thought over the conversation and felt I ought to pin down a couple of points before I discussed it with Southard. For example, he implied that they had until Monday night to start dismantling the missiles. That meant that our attack had been put off until Tuesday at the earliest (unless they fired at our planes)? And had he promised a definite time when our missiles would be out of Turkey?

I called Bobby's office, and his secretary put me through. I thanked him for the interview the day before and said how helpful it had been. I said there were just a couple of things I wanted to clarify in my own mind. He cut in, "I don't want to talk about that any more."

I was caught off balance, and started babbling, to reassure him, "Of course, none of this is for publication, it's a classified study..." and he cut me off again, very firmly: "No, you don't understand. I don't want to talk about it any more, even with you."

"Ah...right. Thank you." I hung up. I was disconcerted. Evidently he felt he had said more than he wanted to. What part was it? I would have to watch out who I told any of it.

[The sequence of telling any of the following remains to be determined.]

[In retrospect: None of what Bobby told me in the spring of 1964 had been revealed earlier in either journalistic accounts or in classified records. The first description of it had come five years later in 1969, seven years after the crisis, when his memoir "Thirteen Days" was published posthumously. That revealed for the first time publicly that he had conveyed, in effect, an ultimatum, and also an assurance of what amounted to a deal on the Turkish missiles, though it had to be private and not described publicly as such. A covert deal, not a public trade.

Sorensen

By now there are several written accounts of this meeting, in addition to "Thirteen Days." The next to appear was in Khrushchev's tape-recorded memoir, "Khrushchev Remembers," in which Khrushchev paraphrased what he recalled of the cabled account from Dobrynin. Bobby's own internal memo of the encounter, written a few days afterward to Rusk, was declassified Bobby's written diary has never yet been declassified, but it was the basis for "Thirteen Days" which was "edited" by Sorensen—who has acknowledged that he modified it significantly in at least one respect (to preserve the secrecy of the definiteness of the covert Turkey deal)—and it was available to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. for his account in "Robert Kennedy: His Life and Times." Finally, Dobrynin's actual cable became available in Every one of these accounts differs in some respects from the others.

My own account above is to the best of my memory, which is particularly vivid on certain points, one of critical importance which is not made explicit in any of the other versions.

Questions, not in order, of importance or chronology:

(1) Was there a "deal"?

(2) Was there an "ultimatum"?

(3) What time period was specified? Bobby definitely told me "48 hours." But that referred to their starting to dismantle the missiles, after which "we would remove them." In "Thirteen Days" he said they needed an answer by the next day, Sunday. That implies 12-24 hours; and in some accounts, "24 hours" is the time mentioned. But that was just for an "answer," a commitment. It didn't mean that the dismantling had to begin within the hour; it's consistent with a 48-hour deadline for dismantling to be observed. Check Dobrynin, etc.

(4) Was the ultimatum a bluff? What did JFK intend if K rejected it on Sunday? (Did RFK know of the Cordier ploy?)

- (5) What was threatened with respect to shooting at recon planes? (Answer: attack on SAMs and AA, probably SSMs and invasion; just from shooting at, not necessarily downing).
- (6) What did RFK say, what did Dobrynin report, what did Khrushchev understand, about pressure on JFK and the possibility of a "coup"? (Nothing to me).

Most attention has gone to the revelation (1 above) that there had been at the least a discussion of the Turkish missiles (ignored in JFK's letter of Saturday). This was later confirmed by Sorensen and Dobrynin to have constituted a private deal. This has been interpreted as a critical element of the resolution of the crisis, as of Sunday morning (putting aside the continuation of challenges into November). In the latest accounts, that seems implausible, even impossible; Khrushchev had decided to end the crisis by the start of his Poliburo meeting at his dacha on Sunday morning (Moscow time), before the dispatch from Dobrynin had reached them.

In terms of the basic decision to accept JFK's terms of Saturday night, to end the crisis on the basis of an American pledge not to invade Cuba, that would apply as well to the other aspects of RFK's meeting with Dobrynin: the two warnings, the ultimatum. But those (unlike the promise of removing the Turkish missiles in several months) would have influenced the timing and urgency of the backdown, the need to reach an agreement within hours.

Given the pace of the crisis, 48 hours, even 24 hours, would have allowed time for further bargaining over "details": the amount and timing (and whereabouts) of inspection, what weapons exactly were to be covered, the additional assurances that might be given to Castro. (Castro's fury at the settlement was—aside from not being consulted at all—over the omission from the bargaining of any further Cuban demands, of which he listed five). What put the pressure on Khrushchev to rush out an acceptance of the crucial point, removal of his medium range missiles, before any of these points had been settled or even addressed? There is an answer to this, and it's in an aspect of Bobby's account to me that has not appeared elsewhere.

Almost no attention has been paid (except implicitly by Bart Bernstein in "C-II Revisited") (Beschloss?) to Bobby's threat relating to the recon planes. This has always rendered in other versions, starting with RFK's posthumous account, as "We would shoot back." (5) Since McNamara had proposed to accompany further low-level recon (U-2s being suspended after the shootdown) with armed attack planes, this warning was compatible with an intent to have the armed planes attack the AA site that had fired, and nothing more. That was the original commitment that JFK had made to the JCS on, rescinded on Saturday, 27. But it was effectively replaced at that time by an intention to respond with a full-scale attack on all the SAMs and antiaircraft, at least. That was what Bobby had threatened to Dobrynin (as he told me).

He was simply relaying the sense of the president and the ExComm that afternoon. McCone, for one, had explicitly proposed both threats in that meeting: that the Soviets be given an ultimatum on the missiles, and be informed that further shooting at our recon would be met with the destruction of all SAMs and anti-aircraft. (McCone, DCI but a Republican and a hawk, was not invited to the small gathering the Saturday afternoon session to discuss what Bobby should tell Dobrynin. Kennedy evidently did not want McCone—or Dillon, the other Republican hawk—to know of the proposed covert deal on Turkey. No account of that meeting mentions that there was any discussion that Bobby might deliver an ultimatum; yet what he told Dobrynin was essentially what McCone had proposed.)

No other account either of the small-group discussion or the subsequent meeting at the Justice Department mentions even as a topic what Bobby stated to me very explicitly and definitely: that he had told Dobrynin the US would respond as quickly as possible (which would be within hours, or less) to firing on our low-level recon planes by attacking all the anti-aircraft and SAMs, and probably the missiles, followed by invasion. The whole shebang.

What no other account presents is—as I repeated to him explicitly during our conversation, to be sure I understood—that there were **two** separate threats of all-out attack conveyed by Bobby to Dobrynin. He had, he told me, distinguished **two** circumstances under which we would launch a **very large** attack: one, in two days if they hadn't actually begun to remove the missiles themselves (assuming they hadn't interfered with our recon missions before then); second, even sooner, if they did fire again at one of our planes.

The first firing had been on Saturday; it included Cuban anti-aircraft fire at our low-flying planes and the SAM that had destroyed the U-2. The recon would continue. (The US did not convey, through Bobby or otherwise, that JFK had ordered the postponement of further U-2 flights, which were too vulnerable to SAM fire). What was in question, from the US point of view, was the safety of US low-level recon, which had begun on the 23rd and been stepped up to every several hours on Thursday (Check). At the last minute on Saturday, the president had decided against night-time flights; the flares might have indicated that an attack had begun. The JCS had scheduled four flights for Sunday afternoon, though so far as the Soviets knew, they might appear at first light. Those were vulnerable to Cuban-controlled anti-aircraft.

McNamara had reported Saturday afternoon that one of our planes had been hit. (Later reports indicate that he was mistaken). Castro told Tad Szulc later that [paraphrase: Their AA was getting closer. It was the first time they had had live, moving targets to shoot at. "I am absolutely sure that on Sunday we would have hit several planes.")

How were these threats to be interpreted, and how did Khrushchev interpret them? Probably neither sounded to him like a bluff.

If anything, the 48 hours, or 24 hours, of the ultimatum simply confirmed the predictions Castro had been making since Friday night (received in Moscow Saturday morning), that an attack, even invasion, might come at any moment, and no later than 24-48 hours. It was in response to that expectation that Khrushchev had sent his Friday night letter, asking (only) a no-invasion pledge. RFK's specification postponed an unprovoked attack to the outer edge of that period. It gave K until Sunday night (Moscow time) to respond. Why did he choose to accept the minimal terms offered twelve hours earlier than that?

The covert trade proposed by RFK, conditional on non-disclosure publicly, gave him virtually nothing. He couldn't use it to explain his abrupt and humiliating withdrawal of the missiles in the face of US demands and threats, either to his public, his allies and rivals, China in particular, or to the troops who had been called on for such extraordinary efforts. If he even alluded to it, he would be refuted publicly and the withdrawal of Turkish missiles wouldn't happen.

To think that this could have been a critical determinant of Khrushchev's decision-making makes no sense: except on the mistaken supposition (believed, wrongly, by several of the ExComm members) that Khrushchev was forced to bargain with more hawkish members of his own Politburo and military and that this US concession would have been significant in their eyes, neither of which was at all true). Yet that has been a major conclusion for many scholars and analysts, perhaps simply because the abrupt Khrushchev backdown was always mysterious, hard to explain, and this offered itself as a long-unknown element of the bargaining.

For both sides, there was all the difference in the world between a public trade of the missiles in Cuba and Turkey and a covert trade (or what was virtually equivalent, no trade). The latter involved virtually no cost for the US—it assured the Soviets that the US would do something (perhaps sooner than otherwise) that the president wanted to do anyway, had wanted to do before and without the crisis, and wanted even more urgently to do (as his officials told NATO) after and in view of the crisis.

More importantly, it gave very little benefit to the Soviets. The actual departure of the Turkish missiles five months later was no particular cause for celebration in the USSR and probably (check) received very little notice. Their targets would be covered—just as fast—by Polaris missiles in the Mediterranean, and the Soviets had no plans or intentions to invade Turkey anyway. It did not convey to the world that the balance of power had shifted in their favor, to parity with the US as a superpower.

Whereas a public trade would have meant acknowledgement by the US, before the world, that Soviet military might had come to be so close to that of the US that their "rights" made by might had also become equal. It would imply that it was **not** the case (as the US implicitly claimed at the onset of the crisis) that the US had rights to deploy long-range missiles in the vicinity of Soviet borders that the Soviets did not have in the neighborhood of the US.

It would imply that a Soviet demand for removal of offensive missiles “too close” to their territory was on a par with a US demand for the same. In theory, in international law, all nations had equal sovereign rights; in reality, as Orwell had put it, some were more equal than others, and rights reflected might. The Soviets would have achieved diplomatic—and presumably military—parity with the US. (And this, with only hundreds of nuclear warheads, compared to thousands of US).

That indeed was the reality as seen by JFK and McNamara: though not at all by the JCS, and the president had not broken the word yet to the US public or its allies. Having just acknowledged—or rather, celebrated—that the “missile gap” greatly favored the US (in the very speech I drafted for Gilpatric one year earlier), JFK would have been revealing what he actually believed, that this made no difference to the new reality of essential parity, mutual deterrence.

10:26 AM (1600 words since 8)

So settling the crisis without that public trade was indeed, in the short run, a “victory” for JFK and the US. (A costly one, in terms of its actual effects on the arms race, the Soviet determination to match the US in Doomsday capability, and the prospects for human survival.) What **did** bring it about, so suddenly, without an additional 6-12-hour round of bargaining that might well have (I would say, probably) resulted in a public trade and a victory for Khrushchev?

As I’ve said, I believe it was not either the 24-48-hour ultimatum (which was, in retrospect, almost surely a conscious bluff on the part of JFK, though Khrushchev could not have been confident of that) nor the offer of a covert trade. I believe that what led Khrushchev to forego any further bargaining (to achieve a public trade, or better assurance of the no-invasion pledge) and to begin dismantling Sunday morning (Moscow time: before dawn in the Caribbean) was his expectation—formed even before he heard a specific warning to this effect from RFK via Dobrynin, but confirmed by that report—that an American recon plane would be shot at by Cuban anti-aircraft, possibly downed, on Sunday, possibly by first light, and that this would trigger uncontrollably an American attack on all the Soviet-manned SAMs and Cuban AA, probably also on the SSMs, probably followed soon by an invasion.

I reached this conclusion during my study in 1964 some time after I had talked with Bobby, when I learned (a) that Khrushchev was not in control of Castro’s order to fire on the American aircraft, and could not reverse it; and (b) that Khrushchev had almost surely not ordered the SAM attack on our U-2 on Saturday morning. (In fact, he had not).

My guess then and now, from what Bobby told me about his warning, was that he and his brother expected it to protect US recon planes over Cuba the next day. Believing that Khrushchev was in thorough control of both the SAMs and Castro’s actions, they would have assumed, I believe, that this very plausible threat would reliably deter him from any further shooting on the next day. (Even so, the president had cancelled further U-2 flights at that time; a SAM could bring one of those down with near certainty, and JFK was not revealing to the JCS, or even to the ExComm, the nature of his secret channel of

personal warnings or ultimatums with Khrushchev, in the absence of which another U-2 flight would have looked like a suicide mission). Neither JFK nor RFK expected, with any strong likelihood, that the ultimatum would succeed. But they did have reason to believe that their warning about the anti-aircraft fire would buy them a day, at least, free of attacks on American aircraft and the inexorable pressure that would bring to carry out JFK's commitment to respond militarily.

But they were making that threat, or warning, *to the wrong party*. What they didn't know, but Khrushchev did, was that he was not in control of the actions they were warning against. Practically speaking, the only way he could forestall a disastrous chain of events that very day (Moscow time) was to announce and commence the dismantling of the SSMS on JFK's terms (essentially, with a contingent no-invasion pledge by the US) **before the first American recon planes entered Cuban airspace on Sunday**. There was no time, even minutes or hours, to try to improve those terms, humiliating as they were (and damaging to his relations with Cuba).

What alternative did he have? Could he tell the president the truth: that Castro, expecting invasion, was determined to defend his own airspace with the weapons under his command, and that Khrushchev was unable to persuade him not to? If JFK had understood that—and accepted that Khrushchev *could not* control his smaller ally, even under US threat--almost surely he would not have made the commitments to the JCS that he did Saturday evening: to send more recon the next day and to respond to any firing on them with a widespread attack. Nor would he have sent his brother to give that precise warning to Khrushchev. But the hypothesis that the SAM shooting and the anti-aircraft fire was *not* a deliberate decision by Khrushchev to escalate the crisis—but reflected instead his lack of control--was not even raised as a possibility in the ExComm discussions of Saturday.

Perhaps Khrushchev could have conveyed that to JFK via Dobrynin during the day on Saturday, as the Cuban firing took place: "Castro has a right to fire, he's determined to keep doing it, and *I can't stop him*." But he wasn't likely to confess that impotence, after assuring Kennedy in his private correspondence that he could be confident that the SSMS were entirely under Soviet control. In any case, he had not warned Kennedy of that reality on Saturday or earlier.

And by the time Bobby was talking with Dobrynin it was too late. Since Dobrynin himself didn't know that situation, how would it have been conveyed to him, before the Cuban firing commenced again, perhaps in a few hours? In the clear, for the world to hear, that Moscow had lost control of events? Coded messages were taking many hours. And would the president even believe him, immediately?

The American assumption that Soviet "allies" and clients--the European "satellites," North Korea, Cuba, North Vietnam--were puppets of Moscow was a Cold War axiom that no member of the ExComm questioned at that time or throughout most of the Vietnam War that followed. JFK and McNamara might have been able to believe Khrushchev's private—perhaps apologetic or abashed—confession that his earlier

assurances of Soviet control “were no longer operative” (in Watergate language), but would their subordinates or the military or the Cold Warriors in Congress have accepted their judgment or respected their “naivete”?

Or Khrushchev could have taken a different tone, revealing belligerently both that the warheads and tactical missiles were in Cuba and that the Soviets had turned control of them—and command of the SAMs as well—over to the Cubans. He could have dismissed recriminations that this was reckless and proclaimed that it was the right of the Cubans to defend their airspace and territory and of the Soviets to give them means to do so (no less than for the US in Europe).¹

But again, it would have been much more effective (in fact, it seems to me, very effective) to have done this earlier, either on Thursday, Friday or Saturday morning. It remains something of a mystery why he didn’t do it then, or even, so far as we know, consider doing it. Even as late as the early hours of Sunday morning (East Coast time) it would have had some chance of deterring both recon flights and attacks; but not reliably enough, fast enough, compared to an announcement in the clear that JFK’s public terms were being met and the missiles dismantled.

Anyway: Castro lost the crisis for Khrushchev. If he had—perhaps on Khrushchev’s request—refrained or ceased from firing on recon planes on Saturday, which also induced the decision by local Soviet commanders to shoot down a U-2—and had not, likewise in the belief that invasion was imminent and inevitable—urged Khrushchev to launch a preemptive nuclear attack on the US in the event of invasion (or even before it, as Khrushchev understood his proposal)—all this giving Khrushchev reason to believe that events could remove within hours toward nuclear war beyond either his or JFK’s ability to control them, Khrushchev would probably have pressed his last (Saturday morning) proposal for a public trade on Sunday, with the probably result that JFK would have accepted it (“in response to U Thant’s entreaty,” conveyed to U Thant by Cordier).

Neither JFK nor Khrushchev regarded the stakes facing them in Cuba to be worth a significant (even, low) risk of nuclear war; and they saw any actual bloodletting of each other’s troops to carry that risk, of starting a chain of events and responses that could end in nuclear war (or else, a backdown by one side or the other even more humiliating and costly than one earlier that would have prevented the cycle of violence. So they

¹ [Actually, the US always declared that it maintained strict control of nuclear weapons in Europe, foregoing the extra credibility of nuclear first-use threats that could be gained by openly giving control to frontline German troops. (RFK, in the first days of the crisis, actually raised the possibility of giving Germans protecting Berlin that control.) Presumably this was meant to reassure the US public, and to conform to US law (the Atomic Energy Act) on non-sharing of US nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the actual US control of German fighter-bombers on alert with nuclear weapons was essentially administrative: nominal, symbolic.]

maneuvered and threatened and bluffed; but neither intended to let shooting get started, even on the lowest level. But—as Khrushchev came to realize, and JFK did not—Castro was a loose canon, an uncontrolled and uncontrollable actor in the drama. He **did** equate invasion and occupation with all-out thermonuclear war, in evaluating the payoffs, the consequences of moves in the crisis. He mistakenly believed that the forces of socialism, striking first, would prevail (he believed the Soviets had at least hundreds of ICBMs—Khrushchev not having disabused him of this, in 1962), but even so, he foresaw worldwide devastation: and was willing to accept it rather than to accept a successful US occupation.

Specifically, it did not occur to him (any more, apparently, than to the Soviets!) that he should **not** allow the use of tactical nuclear weapons against invading Americans. Foreseeing, correctly, that this would lead to an American nuclear response in Cuba and—either immediately or eventually--against the Soviets, he urged a preemptive attack on the US. And this was not merely to be threatened (in fact, mysteriously, it was not threatened at all); it was to be carried out, and he saw it as “no worse than what the Cubans would suffer anyway” (“a million Cuban casualties”: to be compared with, what, a thousand times that number in the world, though perhaps he didn’t think in those precise terms).

On Saturday, Khrushchev suddenly realized that—despite the precautionary presence of 40,000 Soviets on the distant island—he had put strategic nuclear weapons capable of devastating America (along with tactical nuclear weapons capable of annihilating a hundred thousand American troops: something that seemed, mysteriously, to worry him less) thousands of miles away from Soviet territory in the homeland of a young, reckless, romantic nationalist quite willing to blow up the world to avenge an invasion that Americans were mounting in ignorance of this prospect.

He had given Fidel Castro the trigger to the American doomsday machine; and the Americans, not knowing this, were about to give Castro reason to pull the trigger. One of the elements of Kahn’s conceptual Doomsday Machine was its automaticity, the delegation by design of the response to a mechanism beyond the control of political leaders (who could therefore not be coerced into non-response). Giving Castro both formal and effective control of the warheads and missiles would have fulfilled this requirement.

Castro was, in reality, **incoercible** by the US or the SU with respect to accepting any invasion of Cuba without using tactical or perhaps even medium-range missiles against Americans if he could get control of them: which looked to Khrushchev, and probably was, possible, as of Saturday and Sunday.

But even the actual situation—the **possibility** that Castro would either have achieved control (by military action: as I was led to suppose in 1964, by the intercepts) or have managed to influence the decisions of Soviet officers (as Khrushchev feared on Saturday)—would have corresponded to a “probabilistic doomsday machine,” a device that was not **certain** to destroy all or most life on earth but that had a high probability of

doing so that could not be reduced to zero or negligible proportions by actions of either leadership.

As I've been saying, Khrushchev had a strong, probably winning card to play if he had announced this situation to the Americans convincingly before the triggering events took place. There's no indication, oddly, that he **ever** thought of this, either before or even after Castro's message of Friday night and the events of Saturday exposed the real possibilities to Khrushchev. But even if it had occurred to him after he became aware (Friday night?) of Castro's intention to fire on aircraft, it probably would have seemed too late to try to reverse—in time, before events took over--the prior image in American minds of Soviet control he had conveyed up until then.

In announcing the dismantling of the missiles Sunday morning (Washington time), he still couldn't know that the US would call off Sunday recon missions (DID THEY?), or that, if they did not, Castro would not fire on them (WOULD HE, OR NOT?), or that, if he did fire, that the US would not respond with a broad attack and even invasion (as the JCS, or at least LeMay and Anderson, were urging that morning even without this exchange of fire). So (without informing JFK of his limited control of Castro) Khrushchev could not be sure that even his announcement would avert a disastrous course of events. But he was at least lowering the odds of violence at each of these possible junctures.

Bobby Kennedy told me in the spring of 1964, in his office at the Justice Department, that he had given two warnings to Soviet Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin to convey to Khrushchev, in the evening of Saturday, October 27, 1962.

END NOTES

ⁱ It purported to accept a proposal received from Khrushchev Friday evening, though it spelled out conditions for inspection that had not actually been in Khrushchev's message. Fomin/Feklisov-Scali interchange.

Wednesday, October 12, 2011
9:35 AM

Very rough draft

[Bud Southard, who was writing a case history of the Cuban Missile Crisis at CIA, had urged me to interview Bobby Kennedy, if I could. Southard had a feeling, he told me, from his study of the crisis that an ultimatum had been conveyed to the Soviets on Saturday evening.

If so, it wasn't recorded in any documents he'd found and no one he'd spoken with had any knowledge of such a threat-with-a-deadline. JFK's message to Khrushchev on Saturday afternoon—ignoring the proposal in the Soviet message received that morning for mutual withdrawals of US/NATO missiles from Turkey and the Soviet missiles in Cuba and offering only a no-invasion pledge for Cuba—had not been an ultimatum. It hadn't mentioned any deadline. Though American preparations for invasion were moving ahead more or less publicly, it didn't put any more time pressure on the Soviets for an answer than earlier exchanges had.ⁱ

But Khrushchev's sudden announcement early Sunday morning that he was withdrawing the missiles that day—unexpectedly accepting, and even acting on, Kennedy's offer with no further haggling over conditions, in effect ignoring his demand that the Turkish missiles be removed as the price Soviet withdrawal just as JFK's message had--suggested to Southard that something more urgent had been communicated to him in the hours before his announcement that was not reflected in the classified records of the crisis and perhaps was not known beyond the circle of a very few Americans. Knowing that Bobby had had private meetings with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin at least once earlier in the crisis, he suspected that Bobby might be one of those Americans.

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